

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Case File No.: AA-81625

EA No.: AK-040-99-007

Type of Action: Special Recreation Permits (commercial tours)

Location: Mt. Foster Snow/Ice Field: T. 29 S., R. 58 E., Sec. 17, 20 & 21;
Takshanuk Mountains Snow/Ice Field: T. 29 S., R. 57 E., Sec. 12 & 13;
Riggs/LeBlondeau Glacier: T. 30 S., R. 54 E., Sec. 20, 21, 28 & 29;
Bertha Glacier: T. 31 S., R. 57 E., Sec. 28;
Davidson Glacier: T. 32 S., R. 58 E., Sec. 8, 17, 31, 32, & 33;
and T. 33 S., R. 59 E., Sec. 4, 5, 8 & 9.

Applicant(s): Mountain Flying Service
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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action:

Mountain Flying Service wishes to offer fixed-wing commercial aircraft landings and tours on BLM administered lands. They currently offer non-landing flight tours in the Haines and Glacier Bay areas. There is a need for safe fixed-wing aircraft access to remote glaciers in the Haines area. This service will meet anticipated public demand for quality guided services to these glaciers.

Under the principles of the multiple use concept of managing natural resources, the intent of the recreation and tourism goals are to provide a broad spectrum of recreation opportunities for both the resident and nonresident recreating public.

B. Conformance With Land Use Plan:

No land use plan exists for this area. However, this environmental analysis assesses the impacts of the Proposed Action and provides a basis for a decision on the proposal {43 CFR 1610.8 (b)(1)}.

C. Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans:

The Coastal Zone Management Act requires the BLM, when consulting or authorizing activities or undertaking development directly affecting the coastal zone, to insure that the activities or development be consistent with the approved Alaska Coastal Management Program to the maximum extent practical. The activities under the Proposed Action are consistent with the Alaska Coastal Management Program.

The applicant must obtain a State of Alaska Business license and the appropriate licenses and certificates from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

The BLM does not have jurisdiction to regulate aircraft flight paths, altitudes, or noise caused by aircraft overflights or flightseeing operations. BLM may regulate landing locations and on-the-ground commercial activities. Enroute operations may be indirectly influenced by requiring certain standards to be met as a condition of receiving a permit.

Permit holders are required to abide by all federal, state, county (borough), or municipal laws, ordinances, or regulations which are applicable to the areas or the operations covered in the permit. Failure to do so could result in either suspension or revocation of the permit.

The airports in Haines and Skagway are untowered facilities and are under the jurisdiction of the FAA. The FAA is the agency responsible for all aircraft travel in uncontrolled airspace. The Flight Standards Division of the FAA is responsible for all flight operations (including safety) in controlled and uncontrolled airspace.

The Code of Federal Regulations for the FAA and the Department of Transportation Volume 14, Chapter 1, part 135.203 states:

“Except when necessary for take-off and landing, no person may operate under visual flight rules (VFR) an airplane, below 500 feet above the surface or less than 500 feet horizontally from any obstacle”

Refer to EA-AK-040-95-015, Environmental Assessment for Helicopter Landing Tours in the Skagway and Haines Area, Pages 1-10 through 1-12 (available at the BLM Anchorage Field Office), for further information on other required laws and permits pertaining to jurisdiction and regulation of aircraft, flight paths, altitudes, or noise caused by aircraft.

A BLM Special Recreation Permit (SRP) regulates commercial services on BLM public land and related water pursuant to 43 CFR 8372 and Handbook H-8372-1. As the land is selected by the State of Alaska, a concurrence in accordance with Section 906(k) of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) is required.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action:

Mountain Flying Service is based out of Haines, Alaska and utilizes the Haines airport as the point of beginning for their tours. They propose to conduct glacier landings and tours on public land with fixed-wing aircraft (Cessna 185 wheel/ski planes). The glacier landing part of their tours is an option from their standard flightseeing tour.

The operation season is from March 1st to November 1st. It is estimated that this operation will conduct 40-50 landings per season with an average of 3 clients per trip. A maximum of 50 landings will be allowed. Mountain Flying Service is operated on a “walk-in” client request basis. There are no scheduled number of trips per day or to specific glaciers/snow fields. Operation hours are from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week.

Mountain Flying Service is also available for charter operations to the nearby glaciers. This is a popular service for many local residents seeking to experience hiking, camping, skiing and exploration on the large glaciers and ice fields in the area. They do not offer any guiding or specialized supplies with this service.

Primary operation areas would include the following locations within the Copper River Meridian:

Mt. Foster Snow/Ice Field: T. 29 S., R. 58 E., Sec. 17, 20 and 21;
Takshanuk Mountains Snow/Ice Field: T. 29 S., R. 57 E., Sec. 12 and 13;
Riggs/LeBlondeau Glacier: T. 30 S., R. 54 E., Sec. 20, 21, 28 and 29;
Bertha Glacier: T. 31 S., R. 57 E., Sec. 28;
Davidson Glacier: T. 32 S., R. 58 E., Sec. 8, 17, 31, 32, and 33;
and T. 33 S., R. 59 E., Sec. 4, 5, 8 and 9.

Flight routes to glacier landing sites from Haines are well established and adhere to local traffic patterns. Upon departing Haines, altitude gains are primarily over the Lynn Canal and mild terrain. Altitude gains to landing site elevations are made prior to flying up drainages or canyons. All landing sites for Mountain Flying Service are between 3,200 and 5,000 feet.

An EA on Helicopter Glacier Tours (EA-AK-040-95-015) was completed on May 10, 1995 which analyzes impacts of helicopter use in the same area. The mitigation measures adopted in that Decision Record are incorporated in the Proposed Action.

In addition, the applicant would be required to follow the BLM standard stipulations for commercial recreation operations. If authorized, an SRP for commercial use could be issued to the applicant for a maximum term of five years.

B. No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative would be to continue present management and not authorize commercial fixed-wing glacier landings and tours on these BLM-administered lands.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

All of the land described in the Proposed Action has been selected by the State of Alaska as part of its entitlement at statehood. BLM is responsible for management of the land until it is conveyed to the State or the selection is relinquished.

The use area locations listed above are all well above tree line which occurs at approximately 2,500 feet. Access will be restricted (due to the limitations of the ski-plane) to high glaciers covered in snow. Accessible landing areas are primarily headwater

ice fields that often are the culmination of several glaciers creating expansive flat areas. Some ice fields have rugged bare rock outcrop islands which may serve as potential habitat for local goat populations. See EA AK-040-95-015 (p. 3-18, E.4.e and p. 3-19, E.4.h, I.) for descriptions of specific glaciers and their affected environment.

A. Critical Elements:

It has been determined that the following Critical Elements of the human environment are either not present or would not be affected by the Proposed Action or the No Action Alternative:

- Air Quality
- Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs)
- Cultural/Paleontological Resources
- Environmental Justice (EJ)
- Farm Lands (prime or unique)
- Floodplains
- Native American Religious Concerns
- Subsistence
- T&E Species
- Wastes (Hazardous/Solid)
- Water Quality (Drinking/Ground)
- Wetlands/Riparian
- Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Wilderness

1. ANILCA Section 810 (a), Evaluation and Finding:

The Proposed Action will not restrict subsistence uses. No reasonably foreseeable decrease in the abundance of harvestable resources and no limitation on harvester access to subsistence species will result from the Proposed Action. Because these lands are State selected, they may no longer fall under the Federal Subsistence Board, Federal Subsistence Regulations of ANILCA Section 810(a).

2. Endangered Species Act of 1972:

Biological evaluations have determined that there are no federally listed threatened or endangered species that will be affected by the Proposed Action.

3. National Historic Preservation Act, as amended:

The BLM is required by the National Historic Preservation Act to locate, inventory, and nominate all cultural sites that may be directly or indirectly affected by the scheduled activities. This activity has been reviewed by a qualified archeologist and a determination made that no known archeological or cultural resources are present in the operation/landing area.

4. Floodplain Management (E.O. 11988) Protection of Wetlands:

The activities described under the Proposed Action are not located within a floodplain as defined by Executive Order 11988 and are not located within wetlands as defined in EO 11990.

B. Wildlife:

For specific discussion on the affected environment for wildlife see EA-AK-040-95-015, (p.3-18, E.4.e and p. 3-19 E.4.h, I). This discusses the wildlife habitat and issues specific to the glaciers in the Takhinsha Mountains, which are the primary landing areas for Mountain Flying Service. This Proposed Action will vary from the discussions in the EA in that Mountain Flying Service utilizes the expansive flat areas at the very head of the associated tributary glaciers addressed in EA-AK-040-95-015.

C. Recreation:

During the scoping meetings for EA-AK-040-95-015, specific areas were identified by the public where the impact of aircraft noise could adversely affect recreationists. The Proposed Action does not include any of these areas.

There are no known hiking trails to the snow fields and glaciers listed for the Proposed Action.

D. Socio-Economics:

The town of Haines, Alaska has a seasonal, but strong tourism based economy. Retail shops, restaurants, hotels, transportation and tours generate substantial income for the business community and sales tax revenues for the city. Active tourism businesses support other sectors of the community through spin-off purchases.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action:

1. Wildlife:

Wildlife would experience two types of aircraft encounters. The first is enroute flight activity where aircraft are passing by wildlife and their habitats. The second is in the areas proposed for landing, taking off, and recreation activities.

Enroute flight routes could pass by mountain goats, brown bear, black bear, wolves, moose, and raptors engaged in a wide variety of activities depending on time of year, time of day and location. The species most frequently exposed to the Proposed Action would be mountain goats. Aircraft enroute, when at an adequate distance from wildlife limits the short term exposure to noise and visual stimuli, which helps minimize potential impacts. Response will vary depending on distance to escape cover, terrain and duration of exposure. Mountain goats on late winter range (March and April), kidding habitat areas (May 1 to June 15) and on isolated habitat, such as land islands surrounded by snow and ice fields, may be stressed. It is anticipated that fixed wing aircraft passing 1,500 ft. or more from mountain goats will cause little to no visible reaction such as a flight (running) response.

Most species of wildlife become accustomed to aircraft stimuli if the perceived threat is minimized by distance, short duration of exposure, repeated patterns of flight, and avoidance of critical life cycle periods and habitats. Tolerance limits of short and long term responses of wildlife species in the proposed area are not well known.

The take-off and landing areas at high altitudes require use of maximum power during take-off and thus a higher level of noise. Duration of take-off noise is expected to last from one to two minutes during which a safe altitude is reached. Landing areas are at the extreme limits of goat habitat. Some bare rock outcrops in ice fields may have small numbers of goats on them. Goats access islands of habitat by crossing extensive ice fields and may occupy some year long. They would be most affected during aircraft take-off procedures due to the sustained engine noise. Responses could range from no visible response to temporary displacement from the rock island habitat to permanent abandonment. The goats' response would likely vary depending on distance of the rock island habitat from the take-off and landing sites. Repeated high numbers of take-offs near the rock islands could result in temporary or permanent displacement of animals.

There is additional discussion on the noise impacts to wildlife within EA-AK-040-95-015, pages 3-11 through 3-13.

2. Recreation:

Noise impacts to people participating in a variety of recreational activities in the areas may increase. It is recognized that these areas are accessed by back country enthusiasts for recreation via chartered aircraft or extended treks. The actual number of people disturbed by aircraft is anticipated to be low since most people access these areas by aircraft.

Recreationists could be impacted through the interruption of their solitude and quiet by the noise from aircraft overflights while involved in hunting, hiking, camping or other high alpine activities. Enroute flight would pose the least amount of noise and visual impacts. From the communities of Skagway and Haines, enroute aircraft traffic through the Proposed Action areas is common (except in the Mt Foster area). These flights involve commuter and flight seeing trips to Glacier Bay National Park.

The Proposed Action would increase the number of aircraft potentially passing by. This, because of the low number of flights, would be negligible.

More direct impact may result from the take-off procedures at the actual landing areas. Maximum engine horsepower is required to gain a safe take-off speed and may result in increased noise. Impacts would be low because of the short duration and low number of people, in most cases zero near the landing/take-off areas. Some recreationists may also sense some visual disturbance to the presence of aircraft in high alpine areas.

All trash and human waste will be required to be hauled out, however accidental trash loss is possible.

3. Socio-Economics:

The Proposed Action for Mountain Flying Service expands their operation potential and thus plays an increased role in the community tax base.

B. Mitigation Measures:

If goats are observed on rock islands, landing areas must be located a minimum of one mile from the observed goat activity. Flight paths should be altered to avoid flying over rock islands with observed goat activity.

C. Cumulative Impacts:

In 1995, EA-AK-040-95-015 analyzed the effect of glacier landings on several glaciers in the Skagway/Haines area. A large number of authorized landings have gone unused due to the applicant's withdrawal. The majority of the unclaimed landing areas are west of Haines. None of the previously examined and authorized landing areas south and west of Haines are being used at this time. Temsco Helicopters currently is authorized a total of 4,700 landings on BLM land and 3,980 on US Forest Service lands. Currently, all glacier landings by Temsco are to the north and east (Meade Glacier) of Haines. None of the previously examined and authorized landing areas south and west of Haines are being used at this time.

The implementation of the Proposed Action would increase glacier landings in the area by less than one percent. This increase will have little overall impact because noise impact to wildlife from enroute aircraft at a distance is low and the increased number of flights is 50 or less. Cumulative noise impacts at landing areas are expected to be minimal if aircraft landing areas are located away from rock island habitats.

No other applications have been received for commercial fixed wing glacier landing operations in the Haines area.

D. Impacts of the No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative may reduce the potential socio-economic impacts in the form of the community tax base and for the municipality of Haines, Alaska. There is also a potential loss of recreation opportunities for people desiring access to areas they feel are otherwise inaccessible to them by conventional means.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. List of Preparers:

Jake Schlapfer, Outdoor Recreation Planner
Donna Redding, Cultural Resources
Jeff Denton, Subsistence/Wildlife
Dave Kelley, Natural Resource Specialist

B. Consultation

State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources
Land Status, Letter of Concurrence

U.S. Forest Service, Juneau Ranger District,
Wildlife Consultation
Past and current NEPA documentation concerning glacier landing tours

Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Wildlife Consultation

City of Skagway
Socio-Economics, Tourism

Lynn Canal Conservation, Inc.
Environmental, Wildlife, Recreation issues